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GRADES COME IN

Southern California's top planning agency says the six-county area lost ground in 2002, but the bleak report doesn't reflect economic rebound in 2003.



MARK RIGHTMIRE, THE REGISTER



AIR QUALITY

After years of improvement, car pools dropped and days with health advisories grew.

2002
grade

C

Change
vs. 2001



EDUCATION

Less than 40 percent of high school graduates met state college entrance requirements.

D



EMPLOYMENT

Job creation in the area continued to be minimal, although the economy rebounded in 2003.

B-



HOUSING

Affordability remained a challenge, although building permits in the region surged.

D+



INCOME

While the region's median household income stayed flat, other U.S. areas fared worse.

C-



MOBILITY

The six-county area continued to have the worst auto congestion in the United States.

D-



SAFETY

Violent crime declined 3 percent in 2002 from 2001; in O.C., the drop was 6 percent.

B



CINDY YAMANAKA, THE REGISTER

Focus | IN DEPTH

A snapshot in time

Grim study of life in Southern California unveiled, with near-failing marks in education, housing and congestion.

By JAMES B. KELLEHER
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Think the quality of life has deteriorated in Southern California? You're right. Traffic snarled. Air pollution has gotten worse. Payrolls have shrunk. And millions of us still spend way too much on housing.

Those are the findings of a report from the Southern California Association of Governments, the planning agency for Orange, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, Ventura and Imperial counties.

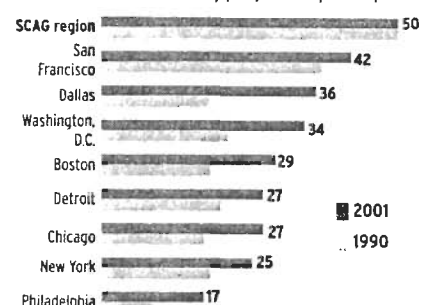
In its annual report card on the region, released Thursday, SCAG paints a distressing picture of the six-county area.

The good news? The survey ended in 2002. In 2003, the economy – one of seven categories SCAG monitors – improved. The bad news? Pollution got worse in 2003. The region didn't flunk outright in any of the seven categories in 2002. But it slipped in four and remained unchanged in three.

SCAG gave near-failing grades to three key measures – housing (D+), education (D) and congestion (D-) – and warned that looming budget cuts may make things worse.

"These scores are not good," Brea councilwoman and SCAG President Bev Perry said. "They don't make me feel happy about living here."

Annual hours of traffic delay per person by metropolitan area



Source: Texas Transportation Institute

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TRAFFIC

D- The region's roads are a nightmare, with residents losing an average of 50 hours a year to traffic delays, SCAG said. This occurred even though the percentage of households in the region that own at least one vehicle fell.

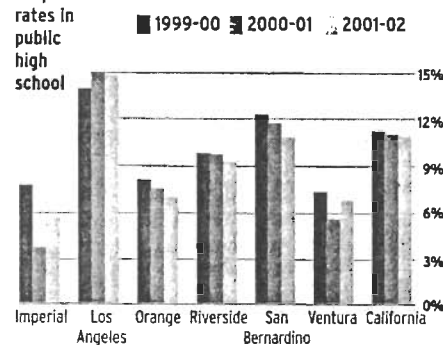
So what's to blame? Explosive growth in the Inland Empire, where the number of licensed drivers jumped 26 percent during the past decade and a reduction in the number of commuters in car pools. Contributing to the problem: The unpopularity of public transportation; it accounts for 5 percent of total work trips and 2 percent of total person trips.

"Public transportation is a challenge, and it's not just our love affair with the car," said Supervisor Chris Norby, also a member of the Orange County Transportation Authority.

"If people aren't car-pooling anymore it's because the lanes are jammed."

The six-county SCAG region also is a dangerous place to drive. It has a highway accident fatality rate of 1.13 people per 100 million vehicle miles – higher than the national average of 0.94 people. (Within the six-county SCAG region, Imperial County had the most dangerous highways; Orange County had the safest highways.)

Dropout rates in public high school



Source: California Department of Education

The Register

EDUCATION

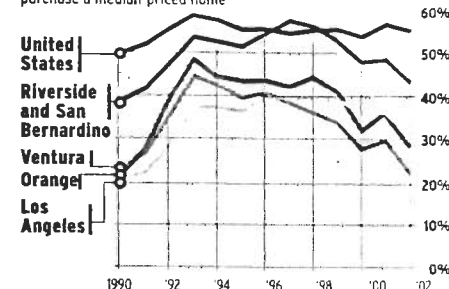
D We're stuck at the back of the class here, SCAG said, with the region's eighth-graders continuing to underperform their peers nationwide on math and reading tests. (The good news for Orange County? Kids here did better than their peers around the country. Ditto with the kids in Ventura.)

High-school dropout rates, however, remained unchanged and were particularly concentrated among some racial and ethnic groups. **Fifty-six percent of the Hispanic adults in the region did not have high-school diplomas**, compared with 20 percent of the African-Americans and 10 percent of the non-Hispanic whites.

Southern California had the smallest percentage of adults with high-school diplomas among the country's nine biggest metro areas and the second smallest percentage of adults with bachelor's degrees. Again, there was a strong disparity along racial and ethnic lines. For example, while 43 percent of the Asian adults in the region had bachelor's degrees, only 18 percent of the region's African Americans had them and just 7 percent of the region's Hispanics had them.

Housing affordability

Percent of households that can afford to purchase a median-priced home



Source: California Association of Realtors

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HOUSING

D+ On the home front, we're a region of house-poor homeowners and increasingly stretched renters.

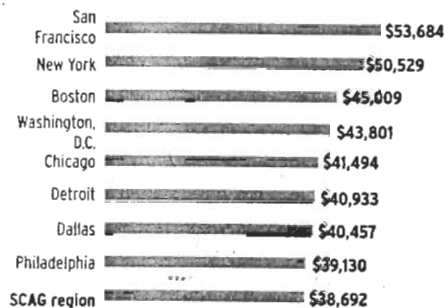
Southern California's home ownership rate is 55 percent, SCAG said, well below the national rate of 68 percent. And that's with mortgage interest rates at record lows. The reason? Although real estate prices rise, personal income is stagnant. As a result, buyers are forced to put aside a bigger chunk of their income to make their mortgage payments. Only one county in the region had a homeownership rate above the national average. Think you know which one it was? Guess again. It was Ventura.

Among the nine largest metro areas in the United States, Southern California had the highest percentage of homeowners who were spending 30 percent or more of their household income on housing.

Ditto with renters in the region.

"We're not keeping up with demand for housing," says Bev Perry, SCAG's president. **"But even if we were, people wouldn't be able to afford to buy it."**

Average payroll per job by metropolitan region (2001)



Source: U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

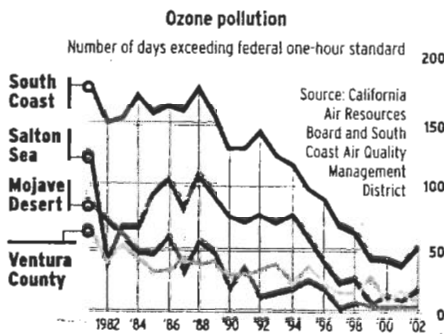
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INCOME

C—Ouch. SCAG reported two years of back-to-back declines in personal income, a key contributor to our sense of well-being. The good news? Residents of several competing metropolitan areas, including the Bay area, fared worse in percentage terms, and the declines in Southern California weren't as dramatic as those suffered in the early 1990s, when the region experienced its worst downturn since the Great Depression.

Still, the region's average payroll per job remained at the very bottom of the rankings for the country's nine biggest metro areas, largely because we lost so many high-paying manufacturing and technology jobs in recent years. As a result, per capita personal income in the region remained stuck 16 percent below the average of the largest metropolitan areas in the United States. Over the past decade, the region's median household income has fallen, bucking the national trend. And the region's poverty rate is the highest among large metropolitan areas.

"We have an awful lot of poverty," says Bruce DeVine, SCAG's chief economist. "And it's grown quickly."



NOTE: Ventura County is part of the South Central Coast air basin

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AIR QUALITY

C After improving steadily in recent years, the region's air quality is deteriorating once again. The big problem is so-called ozone pollution, caused in large part by vehicle emissions. We know it as smog.

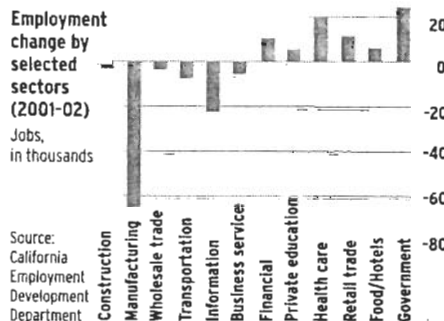
In 2002, the South Coast Air Basin — home to 15 million of the more than 17.4 million people who live in the six counties that SCAG covers — had 49 days exceeding the federal one-hour ozone standard, up from 36 in 2001.

(More recent data from the South Coast Air Quality Management District suggests 2003 was worse.)

"We have the worst air quality in the nation," says Sam Atwood, a spokesman for AQMD.

In a related area, the number of beach closures due to bacterial contamination fell 30 percent in 2002. But SCAG attributed this to a reduction in rainfall.

Orange County continued to suffer the highest number of beach closures in 2002 — 1,671 in all.



NOTE: Information sector includes communications, publishing, motion pictures and Internet service providers.

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JOBS

B—This was one of the bright spots on the report card. Still, the region's performance was subpar, thanks to job losses in the manufacturing and information sectors — the region's first since the downturn of the early 1990s.

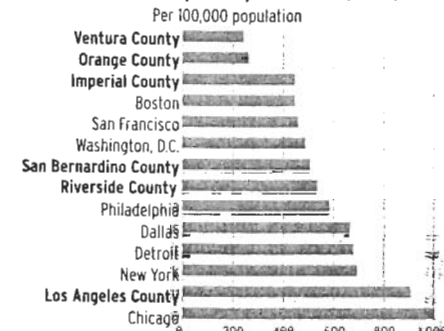
"What can you say?" says Bruce DeVine, SCAG's chief economist. "We lost jobs in good sectors and the growth we've seen hasn't been in the areas we want."

The region's economic diversity helped cushion it from the blow felt in the more tech-heavy areas of the country like Silicon Valley. Still, six of the regions' 12 top sectors suffered job losses from 2001 to 2002, led by manufacturing.

SCAG said Orange County lost more manufacturing jobs in 2002 than it did on average during each of the years in the previous recession.

The sector that experienced the biggest growth in payrolls in 2002 was government. "The current fiscal problems in state and local governments suggest this boom may be over," SCAG says in the report.

Violent crimes by metropolitan area (2002)



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CRIME

B The standout category. After peaking in 1992, violent crimes — murders, rapes, robberies and assaults — have steadily declined in the region, despite a steady rise in population.

In 2002, violent crime continued to fall in all six counties of the region, with especially big drops in Imperial County (down 9 percent) and Orange County (down 6 percent).

Juvenile felony arrests fell, too, and now stand at 40 percent of their 1990 levels. In 2002, there were 27,000 juvenile felony arrests, fewer than 30 percent of them were violent offenses, SCAG said.

Hate crimes fell 30 percent between 2001 and 2002.

Among the six counties, Orange and Ventura "consistently had the lowest rates in violent crimes in the region," SCAG says.

Los Angeles County was the only county in the SCAG region with a significantly higher rate of violent crime than the rest of the state, even though its crime rate has decreased almost in half since 1990.